

Moving On and Moving Out by onehitwunderkind

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Summary:

Empty nesting may be the scariest thing Jim and Joyce have ever faced, and that's saying something.

Moving On and Moving Out

August 15, 1989

The sweltering Indiana sun was unforgiving, even in the early hours of the mid-August morning. Fall was almost, but not quite, within reach. Usually, Jim Hopper would welcome the changing season and the shorter days but this year is different. Each passing sunset, each falling leaf brings him closer and closer to the day-this day-he has been dreading for months: his daughter is leaving him. She only came into his life five short years ago, and now she is going to leave. He knows she isn't going to leave him forever, he knows she is only going to be a few hours away, he knows that she is perfectly capable of taking care of herself, but the unshakable instinct to protect consumes his every thought.

He wipes his forehead, now blanketed in sweat, against the back of his hand as he absentmindedly stares into the machinery of his old brown Chevy until something slams to the ground next to him, fishing him out of his sea of thoughts. Joyce huffs in exhaustion, a large cardboard box sitting at her feet, as she regains her posture and looks up at him.

"You know, while you're doing...*whatever it is you're doing*, some of us are trying to move boxes into the car," she smirked.

Despite her short stature, and despite all of the shit that he's seen, Joyce Byers is one of the only things that actually scares Jim Hopper.

"I was just...checking the engine before we got going," he stammers, shutting the hood of the car, "looks good." He gives her a slight nod, knowing full well that she saw right through him. Hopper always tried to maintain a strong front around Joyce, but he knew she didn't need him to protect her. That's what scared him most.

After a moment of silence, with Joyce still looking up at him with raised eyebrows and hands on her hips, Hopper finally questioned, "Need a hand?"

"I *need* a smoke," she said with a small grin, turning to lean against

the front of the car. They had been trying to quit-together-for a few months now, finally caving in to the passionate pleads from El and Will. But today, she thought, they both deserved a little comfort.

Without question, Hopper pulled a couple of cigarettes out of his pocket, handing one to Joyce and sticking the other between his teeth, then lighting up the ends of each. He too turned to lean against the car, matching her stance, with one arm resting against the hood. They silently stared out of the Wheeler's driveway, watching the brilliant yet cruel sun ascend over Hawkins, both refraining from saying what was actually on their minds.

After a few quiet minutes, accented only by intermittent exhalations of smoke, Hopper finally broke the silence, "You're surprisingly calm."

Joyce let out a meek laugh, letting a little puff of smoke escape with it.

"Yeah...well, I don't really have a choice, do I?"

If she had it her way, Will would never leave her sight, let alone move hours away from her. She and Will fought-*really* fought-for the first time in his entire life when he showed her his acceptance letter from the Art Institute of Chicago. It was difficult to feign enthusiasm when her mind was instantly plagued a million what-ifs.

"Sweetie this is...great, but-" *What if something bad happens? What if you get hurt? What if I can't be there for you?*

"But what?" Will retorted. Will's demeanor transformed from hopeful, to disappointed, to defensive within seconds, which, truthfully, surprised Joyce. For as long as Will had been alive, he had never raised his voice at anyone, never defended himself to anyone, let alone her.

She tried, and failed, to muster up an excuse as to why he couldn't leave without mentioning the obvious, but he refuted her every claim, his voice wavering more with each word.

"You're being irrational!"

"Honey, this family isn't rational. What happened to us isn't *rational*—"

"I know that! Do you think I don't live every day without constantly being reminded that we're not normal?" Tears began to pool at the edge of his eyes.

"I didn't say that."

"No. You didn't say that. You didn't say anything about the Mind Flayer or the Upside Down, but I know it's what you're thinking. But you can't keep treating me like I'm fragile. Like I'm a freak. I get that from everyone else every single day, I don't need it from you, too. Please..."

And with that, it was over. Deep down, she knew that Will would never have a normal life in Hawkins, maybe not even in Indiana. He would always be "Zombie Boy," or "Fairy," or "Queer," or something far worse. She knew he deserved a chance at a good life where he was free to be his true self, but that didn't mean she had to stop worrying. She didn't have to pretend like she was happy all the time, but she tried today, anyway.

"It's gonna be OK," Hopper spoke quietly, wrapping his arm around her and pulling her closer to his side.

"I should be telling you the same thing," Joyce replied, examining his pensive expression.

"That obvious, huh?" He said gruffly. He hated being vulnerable, damn it. Especially around Joyce. But nothing made Hopper more vulnerable than the girls in his life.

El was his second-chance kid, and just as soon as she entered his life, she was leaving it again. When he took her in at age twelve, she barely knew more than fifty words and he barely knew anything about being a father to a teenager. They learned, together. They grew so close that he couldn't imagine what it would be like to be apart

until, one day, he had to.

El wordlessly placed a large yellow envelope between them during their usually breakfast of Eggos one morning.

"What's this?" Hopper questioned, mouth full of waffles.

"Open it," she said with bright eyes. Much too bright given the early hour, Hopper thought.

He picked up the envelope carefully, eyeing El suspiciously as he did so, and pulled out the first page. He cleared his voice and began reading the letter,

"Dear Ms. Hopper. Congratulations," he looked up at her again and she gestured for him to continue, *"I am pleased to inform you that you have been accepted for admission to DePaul University..."* His voice trailed off, and his eyes flicked away from the page and up to meet her eager gaze. Her face fell instantly.

"You're mad. I know you're mad. I'm sorry I should have told you, but I-" She muttered dejectedly, only to be cut off by the sound of his laughter, painting a confused expression across her face.

"Kid, slow down. I'm not mad."

"You're not?" She asked hesitantly, almost afraid of getting her hopes up again.

"No-No, of course not! I'm proud of you." And she knew it, too. His usually surly demeanor melted into a soft smile, filled with adoration and pride.

"So I can go?"

"Well, I..." He paused to look at her, her big brown eyes brimming with joy. He knew he couldn't take it away from her, especially after how hard she had worked just to get here. "I don't see why not, but we need to-

With that, El exploded from her seat and circled the table to wrap her arms around his neck in a hug.

"Thank you so much, Dad," she said before quickly planting a kiss on his cheek and running into her room.

"Hey, where are you going? We need to—" He called after her.

"I'm going to call Mike!" She yelled back.

"-discuss this," Hopper finished, voice falling flat. He knew there wouldn't really be a discussion, especially once he remembered that Mike would be attending Northwestern. She was going to go, and the reality of it hadn't really sunk in until that moment. The fear and anxiety that engulfed him in that particular moment was no rival for what he was feeling now.

The two stood in silence for a few minutes more, until the abrupt sound of the front door slamming and the cheery voices of three chattering teenagers appeared behind them. Hopper and Joyce quickly glanced at each other before throwing their cigarettes on the pavement and crushing them with their shoes.

"Well, well, well...what do we have here?" Will questioned, as he crossed to the front of the truck with a box in hand.

"Looks suspicious to me," Mike joked as he and El came to Will's side.

"Hey, it was very gracious of me to help you move your stuff. Don't push it, Wheeler," Hopper said, narrowing his eyes at Mike. As much as he hated to admit it, he had grown to love the kid, despite the fact that he could be quite the little smart-ass.

"Dad!" El pleaded, embarrassed by his attempts at being the "intimidating father." El raised herself on her tiptoes to plant a kiss on Mike's cheek, knowing it would elicit a reaction from Hopper.

"Alright, alright that's enough," Hopper said, disgusted. "Let's get back to work. We better get a move on or I'm never getting you guys to

Chicago."

At his words, the three turned to go back into the house, with El looking a little too smug.

"I better go help them," Joyce said, patting his stomach a couple of times before leaving his side. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as she began to walk up the driveway, still too focused on the thoughts swirling through his head to begin moving again.

"Hey!" Joyce called out to him from behind, causing him to snap around to face her. "It's gonna be OK. We'll be OK."

For once, Joyce was the one comforting Hopper and for once, he was fine with it. They both allowed themselves to break out into a bittersweet smiles before she turned back into the house.

It would be OK, because they didn't have to face it alone anymore.

Author's Note:

This is one of the first things I've ever put out into the world. If you made it this far, thank you for reading it. I would love any feedback!